



Recorded Events

2013 Seattle Reads, Book-It Repertory Theatre, and author Gregory Martin present staged readings from 'Stories for Boys'

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[0:00:40] Good evening. I'm MT. I'm the city librarian for the Seattle Public Library and we're so glad to have you out with us this evening. We're doing a special evening featuring Book-it Repertory Theater theater staged readings from *Stories for Boys* by Greg Martin. We're grateful to our Seattle Reads sponsors: the Wallace Foundation, which funded Seattle Reads at it's inception; the *Seattle Times* for generous promotional support for library programs; media sponsor KUOW public radio; Hawthorne Books of Portland, Oregon; Elliott Bay Book Company, Rick Simonson and Karen Maeda Allman; Independent bookstores, University Bookstore and Ravenna Third Place Books for doing book sales at other Seattle Reads events. And finally, last but not least, special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and thousands of people in our community who made gifts small and large to benefit the library. Now I always enjoy this part of it. Let me turn things over to Chris Higashi, [laughter] Program Manager of the Washington

[0:01:49] Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library who directs our annual Seattle Reads series to introduce the rest of the program. Thank you. [applause]

[0:02:02] Seattle Reads aims to deepen appreciation of an engagement in literature through reading and discussion. We're thrilled as always to host these readings by Book It Repertory Theater. Following the performance, you're going to be invited to ask questions of director/adaptor Laura Ferri and also Greg Martin is going to join the group. The Book It style uses almost every word that the author has written. The actors speak both the narrative and the dialogue. So the performance you're about to see is *Stories for Boys*. Okay, Book It Repertory Theater. [applause]

[0:03:06] *Stories for Boys* by Gregory Martin

[0:03:21] [harmonica music] We were wrestling on the bed when Evan fell off head first. It was an awful thud. Now I was on all fours, Oliver was sitting on my back. He didn't stop strangling but I stopped making my agonal death rattle. Evan gained his feet and shook his head like a wide receiver after being clotheslined by a linebacker. Evan was four years old. That's enough we got to stop. Two days in a row was enough. Oliver climbed off my back. He was six. No Dad, please I won't fall off anymore. Oliver left the room and came back later with those squishy blue ice pack from the freezer. He put it on top of his little brother's head. Thanks Oliver. He'll be fine in a minute Dad. It's gonna be okay, he said, Evan. All right, positions. Oliver shouted and threw the ice pack to the floor and we have positions. We have rules. No punching, slapping, kicking, stomping, tickling, fighting, poking in the eyes, nose, or mouth. No sharp yank, shirt collars cause choking, no nakedness. Now Oliver and I wrestle in our shorts or jeans, Evan strips

[0:04:22] down to a Scooby-Doo Underpants which Oliver and I tolerate though we would prefer he wear shorts. Evan would prefer to wrestle naked, but Oliver and I will not allow it. Now in the past year, Oliver has discovered modesty. He wants privacy going to the bathroom and changing his clothes, and I respect this. That's refreshing. Now, I've made it clear to all others that I consider him an ally. Now it does not help that one of the great joys of Evan's life is to take off all his clothes and race around the house. Now, we were still in our start positions when the phone rang. Now usually I say ready, set, go, but Oliver treated the first ring of the phone as a starting gun, blasts pulling my ribs with his bony heels and I slipped him onto his back and squashed him like a bug with my tongue the air went out. Whoosh through his lungs. Christine came in. It's your mom. She's really upset.

[0:05:11] I stood up. The boys fell off of me. No.

[0:05:18] This was not good. Now my mother is a stoic Nevadan. Her hero is John Wayne. Really, there's a poster of the young Duke in her office. She treated her stage 3C ovarian cancer, the surgery that removed her uterus, much of her bladder and colon, and the eight rounds of chemotherapy that followed, like a series of unpleasant dental procedures. I thought then that my mother's cancer had come back.

[0:05:50] I took the phone. Your father tried to kill himself. On Thursday, May 3rd 2007 in Spokane, Washington. My mother and father had a fierce argument. Fights and conflict were rare for them. Now, they've been married for 39 years. They had a happy marriage. You want me to go, then I'll really go. He went upstairs few minutes later. My mother followed. She found him sitting on the end of their bed, his eyes unfocused. What did you do? I took some pills. You don't have to worry about me anymore. All the bottles from the medicine cabinet, including the Ativan and the Trazodone good my mother took for her bipolar disorder were empty on the counter. She called 911.

[0:06:42] Two days later after my father had spent 36 hours in a coma, slowly regained consciousness.

[0:06:53] He recognized me. The agony etched on his wrinkled face was clear. I didn't want to be alive. For hours, my father would not speak. Tears leaked slowly from his eyes. For the past two days, my mother had refused to tell me why he had done this. Your father will have to tell you himself. She could hardly look at me. She said this each time I asked, and I asked more than a few times. She said this even in the first few hours after his suicide attempt when it wasn't clear if he'd pull through. As if she was willing to let him take his reasons to the grave. I told my father I loved him. And he mouthed the words, "You won't." My father told me two things that day, that for 10 years from the time that he was four until he was 14, he had been molested by his father. There's more. That he had had anonymous affairs for as long as he had been married. For 39 years, all of these affairs had been with men. He was gay.

[0:08:09] My father cried as he spoke. I cried along with him. I was grateful he was alive. The next half hour or so, I sat with my father beside his bed. But my mother stood at the edge of the room, her mouth in a tight line, her eyes far away.

[0:08:43] At night in the psychiatric ICU, I willed myself to stay awake on my cot. Therapists didn't trust he wouldn't try to kill himself. I kept having these these dark premonitions. Later that night, I startled awake. My father was out of bed. The room had a bathroom. He'd gone inside and shut the door. He was in there for a long time, too long, and I waited. I waited. I can feel the pulse throbbing in my neck. Finally, I went over and banged hard on the metal door. [rapping]

[0:09:24] I opened the door.

[0:09:28] My father was sitting on the toilet in his gown. He looked at me. His eyes were wet and glistening. He could not control the movements of his mouth. I'm sorry, you were just in here for so long. I thought.

[0:09:53] C'mon dad.

[0:10:00] I guided him through the dark to the hospital bed. Pull the thin cotton sheet up over his chest.

[0:10:11] I've been a father myself for almost seven years now. But I didn't tell him in some soft and reassuring voice that everything would be okay.

[0:10:21] The next day, my father vowed he was no longer a danger to himself and so was to be discharged from the hospital. Now on the way home in the car, my mother said to him, "I want you to move out." My father's expression went from shocked, to bereft, to sinister. Don't you look at her like that. I never spoke to my father in this tone of voice in my entire life. That's not what we talked about. I said I didn't know, I know now. See my father seemed to think that because he tried to kill himself and survived, that this somehow proved how much he never wanted to hurt her - proved how much it hurt him to hurt her - proved how much he loved her. A love that had had nothing to do with him being

gay, and that she could not make him leave or divorce him. Not now. "You need to be gone by tomorrow!"

[0:11:16] I'm still in Spokane. I miss Christine and the boys. But see, whatever had felt vital and urgent in my daily life in Albuquerque, it felt suspended. As if my father had died. As if he'd committed, rather than attempted, suicide.

[0:11:44] I felt shattered. I talked and talked to Christine and she listened. I'm so sorry. Christine is a talented listener now. Unlike me, she doesn't interrupt with highly workable solutions, with suggestions and advice, with interpretations of significance. She just let me talk. I wish I could be there with you. I didn't have to make sense of anything. You must be so sad. For seven years, my life had been dominated by fatherhood. I wasn't used to thinking of myself as a son. I wasn't used to thinking of myself as deceived. It wasn't used to thinking about my father much at all. You know, I worried about my mother's cancer, or if my father was making sure that my mother was taking her medication. I needed my father to keep an eye on her. You know, it never once occurred to me that, it never once occurred to me that my mother might need to keep a closer eye on him. I know.

[0:12:53] My mother and father love each other. Their love was unferocious, gradualists without jealousy or tyranny, was playful, was gentle. It was rooted in a deep abiding friendship and a mutual lifelong desire for each other's company. Now when I was a child, my father would play folk songs on the guitar, and we'd all sing; [singing] Michael row your boat ashore, halleluja.

[0:13:28] The answer my friend is blowing in the wind.

[0:13:37] A hundred miles, a hundred miles, a hundred miles, a hundred miles. You could hear that whistle blow a hundred miles. [clapping] My mother cannot carry a tune.

[0:13:56] My mother kept singing anyway. Now I'm guessing that my father loved her even more because of this. Of course he did. God loves my true voice. Of course he does. When I was growing up I unconsciously understood my parents love for each other. Always first, and then came their love for the children. I didn't even question this. I had no reason to question it, and nothing seemed wrong.

[0:14:35] Your father told me he's been with more than 1,000 men. He seemed relieved to give me a number, an estimate. Why would he tell me that? Why would he say that to me? I didn't know.

[0:14:57] I felt hollow, and I could not imagine the depth of grief that my mother must have been feeling in that moment.

[0:15:10] I didn't know how to reconcile my father's lewd conduct with a man that I thought I knew. My father, a thousand men!

[0:15:24] What was I supposed to call that? Was it desire gone haywire? Was a compulsion? Was it obsession? Addiction? I did not want to be associated with such sordid desperation. I felt tainted,

compromised, ashamed. And I was this man's son? The father that I'd always known was grounded, affable, and calm. But this man was driven by a carnal appetite that I couldn't even comprehend. I'd always assumed that my father's inner life was a mirror of his outer life, but this man's inner life was a cauldron, a maelstrom, and yes his homosexuality, it was a shock. But the real lasting shock is that unquenchable desire that I never even had any sense of 1,000 men.

[0:16:28] With a self-loathing that the shame and dark inner loneliness. The cathartic self-flagellation that must accompany the confession of such a number.

[0:16:44] My father. Gay. How could I miss that? I mean, hadn't I been paying attention? But when my father first told me he was gay I knew it to be true, though I'd never once suspected it. What I couldn't reconcile, and what I struggle to reconcile even still, was the most common of feelings.

[0:17:10] I thought I knew him. If I didn't know my own father, who else did I not know. I pummeled my father with questions. When he first admit to himself that he was gay? Where did he go to have an anonymous sex? The rest areas off of the interstate, public restroom near the Children's Zoo, bathroom in the basement of the Community College. Have you ever had a relationship? Ever wanted one? Never had any relationship with any man. He didn't want one. He had a relationship with your mother. How could I have been such a political conservative for all these years? Was he still a Republican? How much did he worry he would be caught? Question in no particular order. There was a vengeance in these questions, a satisfying vindictiveness. Now, I knew most of these questions were excruciating for him. Didn't you worry that you'd give mom AIDS? Yes. Yes. I worried about that. A part of me wanted to hurt him. Wanted him to suffer these questions to some penance. For the pain that he had caused, but behind this also

[0:18:21] there was a genuine desire to to know him.

[0:18:27] Who are you?

[0:18:32] As to who I really am, I am still, and always will be, the same person you've always known. Except that now you know that one part of my life that I've only shared with a priest in confession.

[0:18:49] When did his father stop abusing him, and why didn't he just tell my mother about his father's abuse? Your mother and I were raised in a different atmosphere, both from each other, and from the atmosphere in which you were raised. We didn't talk about such things openly, especially in the South. Never occurred to me to bring it up, much less admit to it. It was enough that he had so much hate for his father for what he'd done to him and the rest of his family. And my father did not attend his father's funeral. My father rarely spoke of him, except to say that he was a violent drunk that beat his mom and his sisters. But he never once beat my father.

[0:19:39] I don't want to go. I don't want to know where my father's father is buried because I don't want to go there, with my shovel and my rage, and just unearth his skeleton. And tear it apart and

then smash every single bone to pieces and take what remains far away. To a place where no one ever know or loved them. Scatter them all on a vacant lot.

[0:20:15] Late at night when his family was asleep, my father drove to darkened city parks, drove I-80 to the bathrooms of rest areas. Early the next morning, he often awoke beside my mother in a cold sweat terrified that he'd spoken in his sleep. The day after he told me this on the phone, my father wrote in an email, I can't answer any more questions like this.

[0:20:46] In the first week in July, my mother came to visit Albuquerque. Now the day before she came, Christine and I decided we had to tell the boys something. So that night at dinner, we told the boys.

[0:21:07] Granny and Grandpa had divorced. Granny was coming to stay with us. Grandpa wasn't. Why? Sometimes people just can't find a way to love each other anymore. Sometimes they just need to be apart. It doesn't mean they hate each other. It just means they want to live alone now. This account failed to satisfy them because it didn't make any sense. It wasn't quite the truth. Then it was a lousy story. It was mired in vagueness and abstraction. Oliver and Evan had visited granny and grandpa's house plenty of times. Granny and grandpa had visited our house plenty of times, and nothing had ever been wrong. Then Evan wailed like he'd been stabbed, Oliver set his jaw and looked out the window. We told them not to worry. This would not happen to Mommy and Daddy. Never worry about that. No, mommy and daddy loved each other. We were going to spend our whole lives together. But of course they were worried. We could see it in their eyes. What they didn't know was hurting them, but we didn't know how to make it

[0:22:04] better. I felt responsible for my sons' sorrow. I didn't know how to tell Oliver and Evan the story that they needed. They needed a good story. No not some half-baked vague first draft. They needed a mournful unflinching, but also funny hopeful story, a story of reckoning and acceptance and forgiveness. Yeah, but I didn't know how to give them that story yet because I was the one who needed to do the reckoning, and the accepting, and the forgiving, and I wasn't there yet. I wasn't even close. What really happened, daddy? Why are you acting this way? Tell us more about Granny and Grandpa. Can't really say a promise lasts forever. People break promises. A promise is a promise, but that doesn't mean they last. Sometimes, sometimes you have a friend and you think they'll be your friend forever, but then the next day they don't even act like your friend anymore. That's, that's happened to me. Oliver and Evan ask what happened to Granny and Grandpa all the time. They wanted to know why. They asked, they kept asking.

[0:23:03] Wasn't it my duty now to tell? I know guys. It's hard. No, Dad. Why? Will they ever change their minds? They ask Granny when she came to visit. That's Grandpa on the phone. No one told them why. A good answer, it makes a story go away. A good answer is like a good ending to a well-made story. A state of chaos has been brought to rest, and one of the reasons that we need stories so much is because this satisfying state of affairs, it happens so infrequently in real life. [singing] 'Birds do it, bees do it. Even educated fleas do it. Let's do it, let's fall in love.' Now Oliver was savvy and probably knew more at seven years old than Christine and I thought he did, but we were pretty

sure he didn't know the anatomical particulars of what went where. Oliver and Evan also knew that some men loved men and some women loved women and that there was a big debate in the country about gay marriage and that that was important to Mommy and Daddy. Now Oliver and Evan knew that their Aunt Molly couldn't marry Ann, who is great at Legos and

[0:24:12] sweating and knew all about *Star Wars*, and that Molly and Ann have a domestic partnership, which wasn't the same as marriage and this wasn't fair. The boys even understood that some people weren't sure whether they were a boy or a girl and that this didn't make them strange because it was completely normal, completely good, completely human. It was the way things were. Well, in other words, we were raising our children to be liberals, with a flair for nuance erring on the side of complexifying and confusion rather than evil fundamentalist over-simplification. [laughter]

[0:24:47] Should we tell them Grandpa was gay? Maybe we could tell them that Grandpa was gay for a very long time, but he didn't know how to tell Granny the truth. Maybe that's what we should do, start there. We'd already told Oliver and Evan that for so long in America people who were gay were not just treated cruelly, but sometimes even murdered and that this sometimes even happened now. For a long time, people even thought that if you were gay or lesbian that you were crazy. Some people still believe this. Some people even believe that God thought it was a sin to be gay. It's hard to believe but true. But there was no way we were going to tell the boys anything about suicide and no way would we tell them that something terrible had happened to Grandpa a long time ago when he was a little boy. If someone had touched his private parts in an awful way that had hurt him very much. No, that someone was his own father. No, the boys

[0:25:43] understood that no one was to ever touch their private parts. Oliver was the only one who touched all of his private parts. Evan was the only one who touched Evan's private parts. If Oliver or Evan wanted to touch their own private parts that was just fine, but they should do this privately. Oh Christine had this amazing ability to say exactly this to the boys, especially when they were four and five in the most kind, offhand way. Hey sweetheart, it's just fine if you want to touch your penis, but you should touch your penis in your bunk bed and not out in the living room. You can come back and play with your Legos when you're done. [laughter]

[0:26:18] How did she do that? Now I watched Christine employ this suggestion more than a few times before I felt confident to attempt it myself and I did, and it worked.

[0:26:39] I remember the day, the day after he came out of his coma, I sat beside my father in the psychiatric ICU. He was not asleep staring at the wall alone in his room.

[0:26:58] I need to ask you something. You looked up.

[0:27:11] Did you in any way ever abuse Oliver and Evan?

[0:27:17] You stared coldly. You said people who are abused they end up abusing others that's just how it happens.

[0:27:27] Your mother asked me the same thing. She asked me if I'd ever abused you or your brother. Then she asked if I'd ever abused your boys.

[0:27:42] An awful look came on his face. A rageful look I didn't even think he was capable of. I would never hurt a child. I have never abused anyone. Never!

[0:28:00] I know.

[0:28:03] I just needed to hear you say it.

[0:28:14] And my father would disappear from my thoughts for days and I'd wonder why I had such a strange ache in my chest. Oh, yeah, my father wanted to disappear from my thoughts, from his own, his own thoughts. Now a day or two after recognizing the strange ache, I would call and he'd tell me about how his work was going, how many patients he had on his caseload at the nursing home. He tell me about the science fiction novels he was reading: plots, settings, characters. He was flying through them, staying up late reading, reading, reading. Sometimes till 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. Sometimes he'd ask about the boys or Christine. Then I talked for a while. There was a relief in his voice when the conversation ended after ten minutes or so. Just because that part of him which had always been in hiding was now exposed, did not mean that he was going to stop trying to hide it. But to hide that part of him, he had to hide all of himself, from me anyway. The one with all the probing questions.

[0:29:36] The first months after my father's suicide, I kept bringing up, What we should tell the boys? Don't you think that we should tell them something? Tell them what? What should you tell us? You know, there are times when I had the impulse to just blurt it out to one of the boys. Your grandparents divorced because your grandfather's gay. That's why. Just, that's the reason, wanted you to know that. Thanks. You know, I'd say goodbye to my father and I'd hang up the phone, and I look to see that Oliver...

[0:30:04] He was studying me. He would study me as if to search my face for the clues that he needed to puzzle it out all on his own. Christine didn't think we needed to tell them anything. They were too little. Yeah, we just wait until they were older. We wait until they were old enough to understand, and even then we wouldn't tell them everything. We would tell them that Grandpa was gay, but we might not ever tell them about incest or suicide. For her, there was no real dilemma. I couldn't come close to Christine's certainty, her conviction, and those many months my mind didn't work well. It was all a sad, confusing, inarticulate muddle. Now in my memory our conversations ended in paralysis and indecision. But Christine remembers differently. She remembers an instinctive determination to protect the boys from psychological harm. She remembers not indecision, but anger at the very fact that our little boys were in danger of ever discovering this knowledge, this truth. But the idea that there were things about our family

[0:31:01] that we might never tell the boys burned inside of me. I didn't want there to be any secrets between us, I just I wanted to start telling them and see where that led us. I wanted to tell them more than I wanted to protect them. I wanted to tell them more than I wanted them to understand. Understanding would come later.

[0:31:30] And my father's secret life, it was undone by an innovation known as tabbed browsing. He'd recently downloaded the new Internet Explorer on the computer and was just getting the hang of it. The window he left open was not incriminating - a news website. The tabbed window behind this was not. The pornographic images of men discovered on the screen left nothing to the imagination. We went to a wedding that night. Neither one of us said a word. When we came home, I said, "What is going on?" I hadn't put it together. I can see now that I was in complete denial. We hadn't had sex in more than ten years. When I tried to talk to him about this, he got angry and come up with all kinds of excuses like that his back hurt. He refused to see a marriage counselor. He stayed up hours after I had gone to bed, but he just, but I just, couldn't see the big picture. I thought, it shouldn't matter, we, we were happy. I didn't want to see the big picture. You want me to leave? I wanted him to tell me the truth. I still didn't get it.

[0:32:43] I still thought there must be some explanation and that this explanation would make things right. That's when he told me that his father had molested him. He was a boy that had been molested for years, was confused, too much in shock. My mother and father, they remained living together in a cold awful silence for six more weeks. My father denied that he was gay. He met her questions with silence. He'd stare at her until she walked away. In the mornings, they went to work, in the evenings, they came home, ate dinner, and slept in the same bed. They had increasingly escalating arguments. My mother went to see a counselor who said, "I think your husband is gay, confront him, ask him." And my mother said she already had. The counselor told her to confront him again. Are you gay? No! My father refused to see this counselor. My mother told him to pack his bags. My father agreed to see this counselor. The counselor asked him, "Are you gay?"

[0:34:21] Yes. I always have been.

[0:34:31] My sophomore year in high school, my mother was not herself. She'd always been intense, passionate, willful. But now she spoke too quickly. She stood in our living room waving her arms wildly. I'd never seen my mother behave this way before; fast-talking and arm waving but she wasn't overly religious and we well knew the difference between literal truth and the underlying mystery, but on this night my mother claimed the God had spoken to her, directly.

[0:35:07] Then my mother was in a bed and could not speak. I remember a period of several weeks when she lay in bed catatonic. It was no way to break her silence. I yelled at her. I yelled that she was not my mother.

[0:35:28] She couldn't respond and my mother says now, "I remember you yelling at me that I was not your mother. But I couldn't answer."

[0:35:46] I miss my mother terribly.

[0:35:51] You should've always been the one that I confided in. You know, the one that I wanted to talk to the most. She was the one whose recognition I coveted and I worked hard to earn.

[0:36:03] How do you explain? Why somebody makes you laugh or feel at ease, important, cherished? And how do you explain that the simple presence of a person makes the world feel less cold?

[0:36:24] My father told me that the muscles in my mother's neck were too tense, the muscles were constricting the flow of blood to her brain, and she just needed to rest. Eventually the muscles would relax and she'd be herself again. She did not need to go to the hospital now. He would not utter words, like like psychiatrist, manic depression, bipolar. He wouldn't even say nervous breakdown. Although I heard other people say it in my presence about my mother. My father didn't even say the word crazy. I wanted to know why. Why couldn't my mother speak to even me? Would she ever get better? Was this awful feeling in my heart ever go away? Don't know that I've ever asked my father any of these questions directly. I can't remember, but I will never forget. The power of those unacknowledged feelings, the confusion and the helplessness, the fear and the grief. My mother's madness finished like an echo. She returned to herself. She did not talk about what had happened to her. And here's one reason why it is so completely unacceptable

[0:37:47] that my sons did not know why their grandparents are divorced. Because they were confused and they were sad and I had an explanation

[0:38:00] and I was keeping it from them. And this unspoken explanation was intimately related to other unspoken explanations. There was a chain of secrets and unacknowledged feelings and sadness that now ran through me to them.

[0:38:20] Now when my father was a teenager. He drove his father around from bar to bar on Saturdays. They started around nine in the morning. They kept going until his father was too drunk to walk. All day. My father would just sit in the car and wait, parked outside on the curb and read a paperback late in the afternoon or early evening, he delivered father safely home, stinking drunk. I've been doing some hypothetical speculation on my father's behalf. If only my father would have gone there done that he could have been.

[0:38:57] I mean if you just read *Leaves of Grass* when he was a young boy, you know. If he just moved to Greenwich Village or San Francisco after high school instead of some small town in the heart of Appalachia. But at some point, I began to understand that not one of my hypotheticals could have helped my father to feel better about himself at his core. My father was molested before he could read or write. He needed more help than a book or any liberal progressive locale could provide. He needed a different father.

[0:39:40] I understood also that every one of my scenarios it led to the same end. If my father had truly been different, wouldn't have married my mother, wouldn't become my father, and I would not exist. I wouldn't have grown up to marry Christine and be the father of my sons. My life depended on my father's shame and denial and secret life. My life and the lives of my boys, it depended on thousands of years of bigotry and hate filled fear-mongering that was only now in our lifetimes beginning to change.

[0:40:27] We were alive., my sons and I, because my father looked at his future and all its possibilities and thought here is the path to happiness, marriage, fatherhood. If only I could just not.

[0:40:50] If only I could just be. I didn't want a different father.

[0:40:58] I wanted to find a way to love my father the way I always loved him, but that was no longer possible. I was going to have to find new ways to love him to go along with the old ways. It still remained. I have thought many times in my life. If I could start over again, I would find a way not to be the way I am. Unfortunately, you can't turn the clock back and start over. I am who I am, and I must find a way to live with this self, this way of life.

[0:41:33] My mother called me. She did not say hello. I've changed the locks. Why? Your father was in the house. He didn't ask to come over? No. What did he want? Wanted some paperwork in the office in the filing cabinet. He's moving. He's buying a condo. Did he apologize? Words, words, words. I'm sorry Mom. This is not his house anymore. He cannot come and go. I know. Why would he do that? Why wouldn't he? Why would he want to hurt me more? Why wouldn't he ask first? I don't know. I don't know him. I know.

[0:42:14] I didn't call my father. I thought, hasn't he hurt her enough? And a week later, my mother called. She did not say hello. Your father stole from me. No. Yes, he withdrew \$300 from my bank account. He would never do something like that. What I wanted to say, but didn't, that my father was the most honest man that I knew. You don't know him. I called my father. He picked up. Why'd you steal from Mom? Now you can do whatever you want with your life now, but you cannot hurt her anymore. Don't get in the middle of this son. You don't know. You stole from her. I did not steal. I took without asking, there's a difference. That's called stealing. No. Yes. I was out in the back patio. The boys gathered at the door. They were leaning into the glass, watching me like at an aquarium. Christine tried to steer them to other exhibits but they kept squirming free running back. I was the best exhibit going. Christine opened the patio door and said, "We're going to the park." What's the matter? Why is Daddy so angry? I didn't want

[0:43:17] to hear his side of the story. All right. There was only one story. And I understood it well enough. My father didn't have enough money in his account to cover the closing costs on his condo. There was a deadline. He went online, entered the username and password from my mother's account, and he transferred money from her account to his. He'd borrowed the money. He had every intention of paying it back. He stole. No. Mom changed the fucking locks. Why? Because you went

into a house without asking when she wasn't there, that's called breaking and entering. What the fuck are you doing? What's she have to do next, get a restraining order?

[0:44:01] Ten, twenty seconds passed in silence.

[0:44:12] I don't ever want to speak to you again. I want you completely out of my life.

[0:44:21] Then he hung up.

[0:44:31] I stared at the phone in my hand. And I walked around the back patio. My heart was pounding. The adrenaline was coursing in my blood. I remember mourning doves were calling out from the phone wires above our back fence. The wind was blowing in the trees. The sun, it was low and red in the Western sky.

[0:44:58] My father called back.

[0:45:04] I let the phone ring.

[0:45:09] You did not leave a message. [applause]

[0:45:53] It's my great pleasure to welcome Greg Martin to the main event of the 2013 Seattle Reads. So about Greg: His first book *Mountain City* won the 2001 Washington State Book Award. And that's when I first met Greg and his writing. It was a *New York Times* notable book. Some people in Mountain City, Nevada, population 33, refer to it as The Book. While living in Seattle 1998 to 2001, Greg taught at North Seattle Community College and Seattle Central Community College, and also Seattle University. During that time he won the Seattle Arts Commission Award for Creative Nonfiction. Greg lives in Albuquerque with his family. He's on the faculty of the University of New Mexico and currently Associate Professor of English. He teaches creative writing. Okay, so now help me welcome wonderful writer and friend Greg Martin to the library. [applause]

[0:47:06] You want to say anything first or should we just ... That was surreal.

[0:47:14] Yes, you can hear? No [unintelligible] No.

[0:47:22] I want to thank Chris Higashi and I want to thank these absolutely wonderful actors for this portrayal. I'm floored. That was amazing. Thank you so much. [applause]

[0:47:37] You know, I wrote that but my heart hurts so bad while you were all doing it. I don't know, were all your stomach in knots? Yeah, there's, maybe we should do this again for everything that I write, even like my emails and memos. [laughter] Forceful. It's a tremendous honor to be here and to have this happen. Christine and I love Seattle so much, and this was a painful story to tell and it was a story that I didn't want to have to tell, but coming up here to Seattle, and meeting all of you at all the different branches and especially seeing this made me glad that I went ahead and did it, even though

I didn't want to. So, thank you so much. I really don't know what to say. I think I'm better like off the cuff with your questions than I am just kind of ad-libbing gratitude, but I have a lot of gratitude. [laughter] Questions. Any questions and I'll help facilitate.

[0:48:46] How about, how is my brother? Yeah. My brother has responded really wonderfully to all of this. He was as hurt and shocked as I was, but my brother's really different. He's not an existential interrogator. [laughter] I'm afflicted. It was a really good portrayal of my affliction [laughter]

[0:49:14] with the need to after this happened with my dad. I felt I would always love my dad, but my mind wasn't on him very much. I was really more worried about my mom and went, after this happened, I felt determined to find out who my dad was and I tried to ask him everything. And my brother is much better at just calling my dad every two or three days and saying, "Hey, how are you doing? What's you reading?" You know just see a movie, how's work? And then talking for five or six minutes, and then hang up the phone saying he loves him and he'll talk to him again in a few days. And so he has a very different relationship with my dad than I do. But yeah, he's doing well and he's very proud of me. Yeah.

[0:50:05] Right. Question is has your mom moved on. Yeah, thanks.

[0:50:11] You know, it's funny, she came to the Greenwood Branch this morning, maybe some of you were there and she got to hang out and talk and answer some of those questions herself to people and right now I think she's watching a movie with the boys at the hotel. So she's here and it's funny that you phrase it that way because she says often "I've moved on".

[0:50:40] And she has. I call her a lot, and she says hold on a second, I'm gonna have to call you back in a little bit. I'm playing bridge, or I'm bowling, or I'm on the road going to visit one of my sisters, and so my mom is tough and she's doing well. I think that I can say that she's probably still heartbroken, but she probably wouldn't.

[0:51:05] Where is it now with the boys? Fine. [laughter] I know it's funny, Christine. Didn't you feel like you're watching them and you were watching our kids? Yeah. It was uncanny how much you all captured my family. Yeah. Yeah, the question, the boys. Christine just had the boys to the question the boys. [laughter] Keeps me on track. Oliver is twelve and Evan is ten, and they're doing very well. Oliver's in seventh grade and Evan's in fourth grade. And the thing that I didn't know about Middle School is that it's a lot different than Elementary School. I learned that since the book was written and my son is so much more sophisticated at twelve than he ever was at nine which is when I kind of finished the book, one of the ironies of our time of our lives right now is that there are things that we're still keeping from them. This book is like a time capsule for them. Oliver knows that his grandfather's gay, and so does Evan. And Oliver also knows that his grandfather attempted suicide, and that is something that we have asked him to keep from

[0:52:24] his younger brother, which is very hard for us to put him in that position of being the kind of the guardian of his younger brother, I hate that still.

[0:52:37] Neither one of them know that my father's an incest survivor. I've never mentioned really anything to them about my grandfather and they will learn that when the time comes, and that is something that has been hard for me to reconcile. But I do think it's the right decision and you're all right to think that Christine is really amazing because she's really fierce and determined about those things and she's right. What happens when the boys read your book? I thought I said softball.
[laughter]

[0:53:09] Yeah. So yeah, this is the game that we're managing. Right? And the way that it's kind of rolling right now is that Evan knows that there are truths in the book, not secrets, truths that are there for him. I wrote this book for him and his brother, and that when it's time for them to know those truths, they'll get to see them and we'll talk about them. But there's no reason to tell a ten-year-old boy about incest yet, especially in his own family, but that will come. Yeah, go ahead. You have a follow-up.

[0:53:52] Yeah, me too. My mom and dad had *Lolita* on the bookshelf. You don't think I read that? So, you know.

[0:54:03] You know, right I don't know that they don't know more than we think that they know. But yeah, these guys might know. [laughter]

[0:54:19] Yeah, good question. People, father said he would never write his memoirs. How do you know that?

[0:54:29] 'Fair enough' is what I would say to that. People surprise me constantly, and I'm getting better at not being so surprised at how surprising people are.

[0:54:40] My dad is proud of this book. He's proud of me, but if it were up to him, no one would ever know this part of his life, and that he would have taken this to the grave. I feel very differently. My Mom feels very differently that the truth is better and that you can get through a hard truth to someplace better, which I think most people don't, if they haven't experienced it themselves, they don't know that yet about family secrets, about these hard truths. And I feel like I know that I feel like that my mom knows that I feel like my dad is happy in many ways when he comes to visit us and spends time with us. Evan just turned ten this past weekend, and he was there for that birthday and it was great to see him. We had a lot of fun. But even now I think that if he had a do-over, he would take it and he would keep going and he would keep that secret and nobody would know. So he and I feel fundamentally different about that, even though the two of us, even though he's supportive of this book.

[0:55:53] Question is how is, the question is how is Eric able to summon the character? Well,
[laughter]

[0:56:05] Well first of all, I mean it's incredibly well-written. So I mean the work is already on the page. It's done as long as I say the words in the right order it's done. I mean, even the folks who've read the book. I mean, you did all the same work that I did in your heads, right? But to answer your question, sort of dodging it, I do have experience in that, which was interesting. So when Laura sent me an invitation to be a part of this, and thank you for doing that. Now, I just wrapped up a show at the Seattle Rep and I had maybe two days until it before I have closed that show. After closed that show and got this opportunity, and I found out what it was about, and it was just like I had to do it because I do have history. Not myself, but in my family, so an understanding of that and a tie for what that really entailed for something like that. But to be completely honest with you, it's all what he wrote it. It's all there. So, question is why, why

[0:57:08] did the major publishers turn you down? What did they say? I don't know but it doesn't matter now. [laughter]

[0:57:20] You know, publishing's really hard right now, and my first book came out with a major New York publisher, but it came out with an imprint of a publisher, North Point Press. And on North Point Press there were only like four or five people working very diligently on a very small list and I had a wonderful experience with them. That imprint no longer exists. Over the last ten years, most of those imprints don't exist. And so when I was with my first publisher, one of the things that they told me was that the sixth, one of the reasons they were able to publish a book like mine, *Mountain City*, was because they were able to publish Scott Turow, you know *Presumed Innocent*, books like that, that made a lot of money so that they could then publish books that may not make a lot of money. And one thing that I would say is that the wonderful independent publishers all over the country that have sprung up since those imprints closed, now carry authors like me

[0:58:29] and so, and have filled that gap and I, you know personally, I wouldn't have it any other way. Did it sting when my book wasn't accepted the first go-round? It did, but I'd had some, I'm a cagey veteran of rejection. Most artists are you know, I'd had a novel that in like 2005 2006 was rejected by the same every publisher in New York and I had weathered that and got back to work. I kind of horde stories by writers with books in drawers, and I think a lot of people do. And so I try to not let any particular rejection be a referendum on what I'm up to and I've had enough experiences with people receiving my writing well to keep wanting to do it and plus I really love putting, you know words in a row and making sentences and that helps and and like this like event tonight is going to carry me for like three months of confidence. [laughter]

[0:59:52] The question is did you have your father's permission to write this book? And how does he live with the publicity? So forgive me, some of you if you've been to the branch libraries, and I've told the story before but I'll tell it again. I called my dad on about a Thursday night and said Dad I've got a 350 page manuscript about all of this. He knew I was writing about this. Would you read it and get back to me? And he said son, I just got back from Target. This is so funny. I have three brand-new reams of paper. I'll print it out and I'll read it over the weekend. I'll give you a call. And so Friday and Saturday went by. I thought that was fine. Sunday came around. He still hadn't called, and my dog Rocky was kind of following me around the house. Like I was, had an ulcer, and Sunday night came

and went Monday came. I was pretty unhappy didn't hear back from him. Tuesday came and the phone wasn't ringing and Christine was like, you know, the phone works two ways. So I picked up the phone and

[1:00:59] I called him and he said, "Hey son, how are you?" [laughter]

[1:01:08] I said not so good. And he's like why? And I was like, oh I sent you my book, and he was like, oh, yeah, hold on. I'm watching Jeopardy. Let me pause it. He left, set the phone down. He walked over and he came back and he was like, I read it twice. I loved it. You made me think so many different ways about my life and I cried a few times and I figured out how to use that track changes feature on Microsoft Word [laughter] Got all these, I've got these balloons in the margins for you. I'll send it to you.

[1:01:45] And I felt better. And then I said, "Dad, is it okay to put this in the world?" And he said, "Son, it's yours, you made this, of course." It hadn't even occurred to him that he would not let it all be out there. So that's like the long story and here's one like bonus track to that question and answer. I was at the fall fiesta for Middle School recently and with Oliver and it was one of those dunk tank experiences where you can throw a baseball and put the math teacher in the water, which I did. And a friend of mine whose son is also a middle schooler came over to me and just was, said hello. And my dad was there, he was visiting, and he came with us. And I said, "Randy, this is my dad." And my dad introduced himself and Randy, who had a difficult relationship with his own father and had told me he really liked the book, looked my dad in the eye and shook his hand and he said, "I loved your son's book. I'm so glad that it's in the world. That was really brave of you." And my dad thanked him and the two of

[1:03:00] them walked away and sat down on a picnic table and talked for like 25 minutes. So a lot of those kinds of things have happened to my dad. He visits pretty regularly and I forward him emails by people that I get that say hey, I really liked your book and this is why and so I think I can't really imagine him responding better. But I am also not surprised.

[1:03:29] Chris Higashi said but you didn't name him and I didn't name him. Thank you. Christine raised her hand.

[1:03:38] Right. Yeah. I haven't. Could you could you say that again so people in the back came hear?

[1:03:52] [unintelligible] Right. Yeah, yeah, I didn't name him in the book to protect his anonymity, and my dad lives out at the end of the road. I mean like he lives on the edge of the Mojave Desert outside of Kingman, Arizona and so he's not looking to be on The Today Show.

[1:04:30] The question is why memoir? Um well and I don't mean this at all as a flip answer to that good question. I think that I could not invent a story and fictionalize it that would compel me more than actually what happened to me and my father and my family. So I think that the truth is hard to

render. I think that it's difficult to render in part because as Joyce Carol Oates says that any time you write about someone whether it's autobiographical fiction or memoir, it's a trespass. It's a violation on some level. They will never render themselves the way you have rendered them.

[1:05:15] So, but I'd also already written a family memoir, and we had all kind of weathered that together, you know, we'd been through that and I've taught memoir writing for twelve years now in a graduate Masters in Fine Arts program. And so I have had so many wonderful examples to use as guides. So it would have been harder for me to write in a different genre than the one I chose, but having said that about your point about solace, I definitely think that writing this book has given me some solace but that's not why I wrote it. I didn't write it for therapy, though I think some therapy has happened. I wrote it to make a contribution to the world in the exact same way and for the exact same reasons that the folks on stage here from Book It put performances out into the world; as an offering, as trying to make something artful. And so while I learned a lot about myself in the writing, I was just as concerned about short and long arcs of suspense and deliberate withholding and rounded characterization

[1:06:25] and scene making and dialogue that really aren't about therapy or feeling better as much as it's about making it come alive as as much as possible in the readers mind for people that I'll never meet.

[1:06:53] So the question is why the tab. The tab, the pornography, pornographic tab? Why did that spark something when you get, you know, inappropriate things in your emails all the time? Who knows but what I would say, James Joyce had this wonderful notion of an epiphany and and by that he meant an inadvertent revelation by which people reveal that which they most desperately want to conceal. So kind of what happened to my dad is like pretty good narratively for me. [laughter]

[1:07:33] But you know if that hadn't happened, would we all be sitting here and would I've written this book? You know, I have no idea.

[1:07:55] Has your father examining his life has he made some changes? My father hasn't examined his life as much as I would want him to. [laughter]

[1:08:07] But that's okay, because I can't make him anybody else than who he is. And one of the arcs of the book is me really coming to terms with that. You know, we want people to be different and there they might be but they might be better off being different in a different way than we want them to be different. You know, who knows? I'll bet you my dad has done all kinds of reckoning that he's not talking about with me. And that's okay too. The most important thing that my dad does is he comes to visit all the time, you know, we see him. We're in his presence my kids get to know him. He's a kind gentle fun guy. And in some ways this book put all that to rest. You know, I don't need to know he doesn't have to do any more examining. He just has to come hang out and that's plenty.

[1:09:02] Is your is your dad living authentically? I'm not the person to judge. I guess that's one thing I've learned but I think it's a good question. And one of the things that someone said that was really

really wise and smart is that there's people who are out and proud, people who are out but private, people who are not out but supportive of others who are out. There's all kinds of ways to to help move the conversation forward. And there's just no question that my father has helped move the conversation forward in a way by helping this book be in the world and being supportive and that's, you know, it's all these different steps. But you know, I think the hope that we all have is that stories like my dad's are more and more and more infrequent. And then when they do happen, there are more and more stories that help those people who are navigating that crisis. Yeah.

[1:10:28] I just wanted to because we're recording, did you, I'm sorry, did you make any discoveries about yourself? Seeing the characters portrayed? It hurt so bad watching these folks up here and

[1:10:41] I wrote it so I was the inflictor of the pain on the reader. You know, I had gone through this pain and now I was part of the, one of the real ironies about writing dramatically is that only conflict is interesting. Heaven is not story friendly. Hell is story friendly. You have to be willing to take the reader to these places where pain happens so that then you can get to someplace maybe better but maybe not and this really hurt watching this, and it's a testament to the skill of the actors up here. It's a testament also to this quirky thing about moving around from one stand to the next and then having people say the other line. I mean, I've never seen a Book It production before and so it's astonishing this thing that you all have made together, and it had a profound effect on me. I was like, I don't know if you were thinking this Christine, but I was like, Is that guy my dad? [laughter] And my mom too, and like, I was worried I have to say, I was worried that people might not be as sympathetic

[1:11:54] to my mom as I am, and you made her so sympathetic. Yeah, which is heartwarming and good. She's tough and it's hard but she's also really sympathetic. So the short answer is that wasn't a short answer. [laughter] [applause]

[1:12:26] Don't go because I said I want you to hear in Greg's voice, and I want you to hear one of the sweet funny ones that, if you haven't read the book yet, you need to know that, and if you have read the book, I think you want to see that in or hear that in addition to what we've just watched. Okay, so just another few minutes. Really short. All right, so this is from relatively at the end of the book. I feel like we've set the stage.

[1:13:03] I haven't, I don't think, let's see. Let me make sure.

[1:13:08] Yeah, I haven't told the boys yet that their grandfather is gay, but all the while that I have been wondering about when are we going to tell them, when we're going to tell them, Christine has this other thing that she's been wondering about too. And this is called the romantic sperm.

[1:13:27] I came home from work and Oliver was sitting on the couch.

[1:13:32] He wasn't reading. He was just sitting there. He looked stunned. He said, "Dad you won't believe what happened." "Try me." "Mom read me that book." It took me a few seconds to make the connection. Really, that book? "The where-did-I-come-from book?" "Yes!" "Mom didn't tell me she

was going to read you that book today. I thought I was going to have to read you that book. She didn't tell me either!"

[1:14:06] Oliver wasn't really upset, just a little shaken up. He was enjoying himself, the two of us acting our parts, saying our lines. Mommy sat down right next to me. She had the book and just started reading it. He was shaking his head in part lingering disbelief, part mock disbelief. "How did you handle it?" "I screamed." Christine came into the living room from the kitchen. She had a huge grin on her face. He ran around the house. He hid in the closet. He kept shouting, "Are you trying to kill me? Why are you doing this to me?" Oliver's cheeks burned red but his eyes were shining and his smile was so big I could see his missing teeth. "We laughed a lot," Christine said, "I told him Mama Kay read this exact same book to me when I was nine, and I thought I was going to die. Now I have to read it to you. It's part of my job." "I thought I was going to have a heart attack," Oliver said, "Where's Evan?" "He's at Sam's," Christine said. "Mommy planned the whole thing," I said. "I know," Oliver said. "It was an ambush,"

[1:15:23] Christine said. "I'd been putting it off, and putting it off, and I just decided today that I couldn't wait any longer. You're not mad at me?" "Hardly," I said, "Maybe Oliver is though. Oliver?" Oliver growled. Christine went back into the kitchen. I sat down next to Oliver. "Wow, big day. That's a lot to take in. Have you had a snack? Can I get you a glass of water?" "I'm okay." "It's a pretty funny book," I said, "It really spells it all out." "You can say that again," Oliver said. "The romantic sperm," I said, quoting the book. "Dad, stop!" [laughter] "Any questions?" I asked. "No!" "Okay," I said, "any time if you want to ask me about it you can. I'm here for you." He nodded. "Where's the book?" "I made mommy put it away." I went into the kitchen. Christine was making spaghetti with Trader Joe's flame-broiled turkey meatballs, which were always a big hit. "That was easy enough," I said. Christine slapped my shoulder. "It was a blast, we cracked up. I had to revise the book some as I went along. It's great, but it's a little out of date. I told him that sex isn't

[1:16:38] just about making babies, that people have sex just to express their love for one another. I told him that the man doesn't have to get on top of the woman. The woman can get on top of the man. There were all sorts of ways to get the job done. He looked at me with these really big eyes then he screamed." [laughter] [applause]

[1:17:11] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.